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Marvin Harris, 74, Is Dead; Professor Was Iconoclast of Anthropologists

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Marvin Harris, an anthropologist who spent his career adding fuel to the fires of academic controversy, as when he theorized that the cannibalism of the Aztecs was motivated by protein deprivation, died on Thursday in Gainesville, Fla., where he lived. He was 74.

His daughter, Susan, said the cause was complications after hip surgery.

Dr. Harris, called "one of the most controversial anthropologists alive" by Smithsonian magazine in 1986, believed that human social life was shaped in response to the practical problems of human existence. He argued essentially that cultural differences did not matter much, a novel approach in a discipline dedicated to studying cultural differences.

The Washington Post described him in 1983 as "a storm center in his field." And the Smithsonian article said he pitted himself "against the mainstream of anthropological thought."

He even took on anthropology's godmother, Margaret Mead, though he was quick to point out that in this he was hardly alone. "There's never been anything other than a good deal of disquiet about her methods," he told The New York Times in 1983.

Dr. Harris, who called his approach "cultural materialism," was an anthropology professor at Columbia University from 1953 until 1980, including three years as department chairman. From 1980 until 2000, he held a graduate research professorship at the University of Florida.

But his provocative ideas, and equally provocative presentation, gave him a sphere of influence greatly exceeding that of an ordinary academic. Many of his 17 books were aimed at general audiences.

The Hindu ban on killing cows? Absolutely necessary as a strategy of human existence, Dr. Harris contended: they are much more valuable for plowing fields and providing milk than as a one-time steak dinner.

"Westerners think that Indians would rather starve than eat their cows," he told Psychology Today.

"What they don't understand is that they will starve if they do eat their cows."

In Dr. Harris's view, then, a manufactured "divine intervention" was needed to encourage people simply to do the practical thing.

The Jewish and Muslim bans on eating pork? Pigs eat the same foods as humans, he reasoned, and are expensive to keep. Sheep, goats and cattle, by contrast, thrive on grass, and provide wool, milk and labor.

Warfare? A way of curbing population when protein gets scarce. Neckties? A badge men wear to indicate they are above physical labor.

Witchcraft? A convenient culprit for the rising protest that church and state faced from the 15th century to the 17th.

Dr. Harris's zest for controversy was suggested by the title of an article he wrote for The New York Times Magazine in 1977: "Why Men Dominate Women." So was his contention that Aztec cannibalism sprang from a need for protein sufficiency, a view that drew some strong opposition. "It takes an heroic act of utilitarian faith to conclude that this sacrificial system was a way the Aztecs had for getting more meat," Marshall Sahlins wrote in The New York Review of Books in 1978.

Marvin Harris was born in Brooklyn. Growing up in New York City in the 1930's, he wanted to understand the millions of strangers around him. He would stare at the windows of apartment buildings, wondering about the figures behind them. He graduated from Columbia, then earned his doctorate there. As a young professor, he was critical of the university's administration and a strong supporter of student protests of the 1960's. David B. Truman, vice president and provost, accused him of "authoritarian madness."

Though his studies took him throughout the world, from Brazil to Mozambique to India, he kept his own country in his anthropological sights. In "The Anthropology of a Changing Culture" (Simon & Schuster, 1981), he railed against home-grown outrages he perceived, from appliances that did not work to bloated government bureaucracies.

In The New York Times Book Review, Robert Lekachman called the book -- which was rereleased in 1987 under the author's original title, "Why Nothing Works: The Anthropology of Daily Life" -- a "remarkably concise, angry outcry at the current condition of America."

His other books included "Cannibals and Kings" (Random House, 1977) and "Culture, People and Nature," which became a widely used anthropology textbook.

In addition to his daughter, who lives in the San Francisco area, he is survived by his wife, Madeline.

Photo: Marvin Harris (University of Florida)

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